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SUBJECT: THE TURKISH PRESS DEBATES THE PKK ISSUE

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

SUMMARY

1. (U) The increase in PKK violence in Turkey, culminating in the July 16 bus bombing in the Turkish resort of Kusadasi, has accelerated the public debate over how best to deal with the PKK. The dominant view continues to blame the violence on the perceived US failure to fulfill its commitment to eliminate the PKK camps in northern Iraq. A majority of columnists accuse the United States of protecting the PKK to use later as a "trump card" against Turkey. However, a small minority (perhaps 10 percent) of commentators, however, has broadened the debate to consider the government's responsibility to handle - and solve - the PKK problem. End Summary.

BLAMING THE US

2. (U) Not surprisingly, Turkey's public debate over the increase in PKK violence over the past year has focused on the continued PKK presence in Iraq, and the failure of the United States to take military action against the PKK. Many commentators have speculated that the US has ulterior motives for not moving against the PKK.

Mustafa Mutlu's column in the daily "Vatan" on July 20 is a typical example of this view: "On June 11, it was reported that the US military in Iraq had distributed a list of 150 'wanted' PKK militants to its troops. This was seen as a gesture by the US following the visit of Prime Minister Erdogan to Washington. But it is very well known where each of these 150 people are, what they are doing, even what they are eating and drinking. Our intelligence and security forces have this information, as do US troops, from whom they have asked help many times. There is nobody being 'chased' and nobody 'chasing' anyone. So now 40 days have passed. Within those 40 days, what has the US done besides encouraging the rabbit to run away? A huge nothing! You might say 'well, didn't the US hand over Ocalan to us?' Yes, that's true. But the relationship was different then. I have serious doubts about whether the United States is sincere on the question of capturing PKK leaders."

SEEING A BIGGER PICTURE

3. (U) Although Mutlu's commentary is indicative of the dominant perspective in the Turkish press, a small minority (perhaps 10 percent) of columnists writing on the PKK controversy has broadened the debate. They are questioning whether the government has a policy in the southeast, and what Turkey could do differently to undercut the PKK at home. Several examples are given below:

Ferai Tinc, foreign news editor of Turkey's leading daily "Hurriyet" wrote on July 18: "The enemy is at home. It is very important to understand that in the struggle against terrorism. After September 11, everyone started to believe that the roots of terrorism lay somewhere else, so some went looking for them in Iraq and Afghanistan. And we are caught up in the belief that the only effective solution to our terrorism problem is through a military operation in northern Iraq. But to strike a blow against terror, we don't have to go so far away. The enemy is here at home. We need to start the struggle against terrorism in Turkey."

Hasan Cemal, writing in the daily "Milliyet" on July 21: "The Southeast is at a critical turning point. The people don't want to hear the sound of weapons or to watch the same horror film again. This is why the PKK base of support is gradually shrinking. The emergence of a peace movement is possible in spite of the PKK. But just like on the Cyprus issue, the Southeast requires political courage, political will, and determination. It is needed for an amnesty, for the implementation of reforms, and for the opening of social and economic initiatives. It is also necessary for using new approaches and new terminology, to open new windows for the Kurdish-origin citizens of the Republic of Turkey. There were bad memories in Cyprus, but they were erased

through political determination. The world didn't come to an end. There are many bad memories in the Southeast as well. Some of them have also been erased, but others remain. If Turkey, through courage and determination, could erase these remaining memories in the Southeast, it will open the way not to separatism and instability, but to peace and tranquility."

Conservative Islamist columnist Ahmet Tasgetiren, a reference point for the AKP, challenged the Government in his July 11 column in the Islamist-oriented "Yeni Safak:" "A few words for the AKP Government: Where are you on this issue? When are you going to begin your initiative in the East and Southeast? Once again, security measures are coming to dominate that region. What have you done to prevent that from happening over the past two and a half years? The people of the region gave you a bonus (in last year's municipal elections). What have you done to pursue a more vigorous dialogue with those people? And if the tense security situation in the Southeast begins to affect developments in Ankara, who will be to blame then?"

COMMENT

14. (SBU) The voices quoted in para 3 are a rational alternative to the general anti-American, anti-EU tone that predominates in the Turkish media. These columnists face an uphill struggle, however, as their arguments fly in the face of a strongly nationalist political climate and an entrenched press establishment with a tendency to blame America (or Europe) first. End Comment.

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